

Effects of Student Self-Assessment on Knowledge Achievement and Academic Thinking^{*}

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of self-assessment on EFL students' knowledge achievement and academic thinking. The subjects for the study consisted of 94 seniors enrolled in the Department of English at the School of Education in Suez, during the first semester of the 2000/2001 academic year. These subjects were randomly divided into two equal groups: an experimental group and a control group. In the experimental group, each student

^{*} This study was published by Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), USA, 2001.

was asked to independently assess his/her own knowledge and thinking before and after each lecture throughout the semester. In the control group, students were taught the same ELT methodology course with the same method without self-assessing their own knowledge or thinking. The study lasted a period of three months (one session per week). Prior to, and at the end of this period, all subjects were tested on knowledge achievement and academic thinking. Statistical analysis of the data revealed that the two groups scored about equally on both knowledge achievement and academic thinking on the pretest, and that the experimental group scored higher on the same dependent variables on the posttest, but the difference was not significant at the 0.05 level. Based on these results, conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made.

Introduction

Recently, self-assessment has been offered as a type of alternative assessment due to the concerns that the traditional type of assessment is not authentic and does not help students develop in knowledge or thinking (10; 25; 41; 45; 46). This new type of assessment reflects the constructivist theory of learning which views learners as active participants in the construction and evaluation of their own knowledge and thinking (48). Advocates of this theory further claim that self-assessment has many advantages. The first of these advantages is that it promotes students' autonomy (6; 16; 19; 21; 29; 35; 57; 58). The second advantage, as mentioned by Nunan (38), is that self-assessment assists students in "the development of a critical self-consciousness ... of their own role as active agents within the learning process" (pp. 134-135). The third advantage is that self-assessment improves students' metacognition, which can, in turn, lead to better thinking and better learning (1; 13; 40; 52). The fourth advantage of self-assessment is

that it enhances students' motivation, which can, in turn, increase their involvement in learning and thinking (2; 11; 29; 43). The fifth advantage of self-assessment is that it fosters students' self-esteem and self-confidence, which can, in turn, encourage them to see the gaps in their knowledge and thinking and to quickly begin filling these gaps (34; 49; 51). The sixth advantage is that self-assessment helps students integrate theory and practice and relate knowledge to their own lives (29). The seventh and final advantage of self-assessment is that it alleviates teachers' assessment burden (15; 22).

Along with the previously mentioned advantages, self-assessment has also a number of disadvantages. The first disadvantage is that it is an unreliable measure of thinking and learning. The unreliability of this type of assessment is due to two main reasons. The first reason is that students may under- or over-estimate their own knowledge and thinking (23; 28; 32). The second reason is that students can cheat when they assess their own skills (20). The

second disadvantage is that self-assessment is quite difficult for some student types (9; 31; 33). The third and final disadvantage of self-assessment is that students resist it (31; 32). This resistance, as MacGregor (31) states, is mainly due to students' belief that "it is the teacher's purview to make judgments about what is important to learn and what learning is important to assess" (p. 36).

The above diverse viewpoints make it difficult for teachers to decide whether to allow students to assess their own knowledge and thinking or not. These viewpoints also point toward the need for research in this area to help teachers in their decision making about the inclusion of this type of assessment in their courses.

Review of related research

The research related to the problem under investigation reported conflicting results in different subject areas. In the area of language, some studies (e.g., 30; 55) found a positive correlation

between the accuracy of students' self-assessment of their language skills and their actual (classroom/test) performance, whereas others (e.g., 7; 28; 44) found a very weak or no correlation between the same variables. For detailed reviews of research in this area, see Blanche and Merino (8) and North (37). Similarly, studies done in subject areas other than language also yielded contradictory results. Some of these studies (e.g., 47; 56) found that self-assessment improved knowledge achievement, whereas others (e.g., 14; 39) found that self-assessment did not increase knowledge achievement. In the area of thinking, no studies have focused directly on the effect of self-assessment on this skill in general or academic thinking in particular.

Research hypotheses

Based on the literature reviewed above, the hypotheses of the study were stated in the null form as follows:

- (1) There would be no statistically significant difference in the posttest mean scores between the experimental group and the control group on knowledge achievement.
- (2) There would be no statistically significant difference in the posttest mean scores between the experimental group and the control group on academic thinking.

Significance of the study

As self-assessment is one of the cornerstones of autonomous learning, this study may contribute to promoting autonomy in prospective EFL teachers. As a consequence of this, they are likely to be more active and more reflective, both during their preparation program and throughout their professional life. The study is also a step forward toward integrating thinking with knowledge during the implementation of academic courses.

Method

Subjects

The subjects for the study consisted of 94 seniors enrolled in the department of English, at the School of Education in Suez, during the first semester of the 2000/2001 academic year. These subjects were randomly divided into two equal groups: an experimental group and a control group. The same instructor, the researcher, taught the two groups with one class immediately following the other. To avoid bias, he kept a daily log to ensure that the same materials were taught to both groups with the same method, with the exception of allowing the experimental group to assess their own knowledge and thinking before and after each lecture.

Instruments

The instruments used in the study were the following:

- (1) Two pre-posttests, one for testing knowledge and the other for testing thinking. These tests were very specific to the goals of

the course taught to the subjects for the study. (For the course goals, see appendix A.) In designing both tests, the researcher followed the procedures suggested by Bachman and Palmer (5). (See part I in appendixes B & C.) Before the administration of both tests, their validity was established by four university teachers, who reviewed them in light of the portions of design statement and course goals. Furthermore, their internal consistency was determined by the split-half reliability procedures. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated, from scores of twenty students not included in the study, on the odd- and even-numbered tasks, and this statistic was then adjusted by applying the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula. The resulting split-half reliability coefficient was 0.93 for the knowledge test, and 0.86 for the thinking test.

- (2) Two holistic rating scales, one for scoring knowledge and the other for scoring thinking. (See part II in appendixes B & C.)

Course description

The ELT methodology course used for the study consisted of 7 main parts. Part one dealt with the various approaches to teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Part two dealt with teaching the subsidiary language skills. Part three dealt with teaching the main language skills. Part four was devoted to the similarities and differences between each two main language skills. Part five dealt with the integration of each two main language skills in the EFL classroom. Part six dealt with the integration of all language skills in the EFL classroom. Part seven consisted of three chapters that were devoted in turn to error correction, use of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching, and language testing.

Procedure

Before the study began, all subjects were tested on their knowledge and thinking of the ELT methodology course that would be taught

to them. These subjects were then randomly divided into two equal groups: an experimental group and a control group. Statistical analysis of the pretest data revealed that the two groups scored about equally on both knowledge achievement and academic thinking ($t = 0.85$, $p > 0.20$; $t = 0.92$, $p > 0.20$, respectively). Throughout the semester, students in the experimental group were asked to independently assess their own knowledge and thinking before and after each lecture. Before the beginning of each lecture, each student in this group answered four teacher-prepared questions that probed his/her background knowledge and thinking (two questions for each) of the main topics in the lecture. At the end of the lecture, he/she was asked to answer the same questions and compare his/her pre and post responses to see how much he/she had learned. In the control group, students were taught the same course with the same method without self-assessing their own knowledge or thinking. The study lasted a period of three months (one session per week). At the end of this period, all

subjects were tested on knowledge and thinking of the ELT methodology course taught to them.

Scoring

Before scoring, two Ph.D. students were instructed in the use of the two scoring scales. The interrater reliability was also established for both dependent variables. It was found to be 0.92 for knowledge and 0.87 for thinking. During scoring, answers with scores that differed by two or more points were read by a third rater and the extreme score was dropped. That is, the score for each answer was the average of two raters, either the first two raters, or in case in which a third rater was required, the average of the third rater and the closest score. To avoid scoring bias, all subjects used identification numbers on their answer sheets. Furthermore, the raters made no marks on students' sheets and recorded scores on separate ones.

Results and discussion

The posttest data were statistically analyzed using the t-test. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

Table 1

The T-Value of the Difference in the Mean Scores between the
Experimental Group and the Control Group on
Knowledge Achievement

Group	N	M	SD	T-Value
Experimental	47	7.19	.97	1.78
Control	47	6.77	1.32	

As shown in Table 1, statistical analysis of the posttest data revealed that the mean score of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group on knowledge achievement, but the difference was not significant at the 0.05 level ($t = 1.78, p > 0.05$).

Therefore, the first null hypothesis was accepted. This result may be due to several reasons. First, students in the experimental group might not participate fully and positively in assessing their own knowledge because of the fact that they are used to being spoon-fed and evaluated by their instructors. Second, the students' lack of self-assessment skills might have kept them from getting the most benefit from self-assessment. Third, resistance to new innovations could have decreased the benefits of self-assessment for the experimental group. Fourth, students' unawareness of the advantages of self-assessment might lead them to perceive it as a waste of their time and question its value for arriving at goals. Fifth, students might not take self-assessment seriously because of the instructor's passivity during and after their engagement in it.

Table 2

The T-Value of the Difference in the Mean Scores between the
Experimental Group and the Control Group on
Academic Thinking

Group	N	M	SD	T-Value
Experimental	47	18.85	6.74	1.82
Control	47	16.70	4.51	

As shown in Table 2, statistical analysis of the posttest data revealed that the mean score of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group on academic thinking, but the difference was not significant at the 0.05 level ($t = 1.82, p > 0.05$). Therefore, the second null hypothesis was accepted. This result may be due to the short time of the study. The development of students' thinking, as many studies have shown, "occurs only after a two-year period of consistent and sustained instruction that employs a carefully designed curriculum and well trained teachers"

(12: 276). Furthermore, linking self-assessment to lecturing, as done in this study, is not enough for the development of students' thinking. The development of students' thinking requires considerably more than this. It requires that all teachers should (a) incorporate thinking into their courses, (b) use teaching strategies that provoke students' thinking, (c) help students become aware of their own thinking processes, and (d) use examinations that test knowledge as well as thinking.

Conclusions and recommendations

There is not enough evidence to conclude that self-assessment can improve students' knowledge or academic thinking. At the same time, there is no evidence from this study or other studies that self-assessment causes students to score lower on knowledge or thinking tests. Therefore, the researcher suggests that for self-assessment to achieve its full potential, teachers should (a) help students choose, adapt, or design self-assessment techniques that

fit the course goals, (b) provide students with support during assessing their own knowledge and thinking, and lessen this support gradually as students become more confident, (c) collect students' responses, read through them, give feedback on them, and make use of them to change their own teaching strategies, (d) self-assess their own teaching to encourage students to involve and stay involved in self-assessment, and (e) be explicit with their students about the advantages of this type of assessment to help them build positive attitudes towards it. Additionally, students need to develop a routine of self-assessment by embedding it in every course at all levels.

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Appendix A

Goals of the ELT Methodology Course

By the end of the fourth year ELT methodology course students should:

1. know and evaluate the different approaches to teaching English as a foreign language,
2. know and evaluate the methods of teaching subsidiary language skills,
3. analyze main language skills into subskills,
4. know and evaluate the methods of teaching main language skills,
5. know how to integrate subsidiary skills with main language skills,
6. know the similarities and differences between each two main language skills,
7. know how to integrate each two main language skills,
8. know how to integrate all language skills in the EFL classroom,

9. know and evaluate the different approaches to error correction,
10. know and evaluate the different approaches to using the mother tongue in teaching English as a foreign language, and
11. know and evaluate the different approaches to language testing.

Appendix B

Pre/Post Knowledge Test

(I) Portions of design statement

- (1) Purpose of the test: This test is designed to measure students' knowledge of ELT methodology. It is very specific to the goals and objectives of the fourth year methodology course.
- (2) Definition of construct: The construct to be measured is knowledge of ELT methodology. This construct includes:
 - (a) knowledge of different approaches to teaching English as a foreign language,
 - (b) knowledge of methods of teaching subsidiary and main language skills,
 - (c) knowledge of similarities and differences between each two main language skills,
 - (d) knowledge of different approaches to error correction,

- (e) knowledge of different approaches to using the mother tongue in teaching English as a foreign language,
- (f) knowledge of different approaches to language testing, etc.

(3) Characteristics of test takers: Test takers are senior students enrolled in the department of English at the School of Education in Suez, 21 years of age and up, male and female.

(II) The test

(1) Instructions to test takers: This is a test of your knowledge of ELT methodology. It takes 3 hours. It consists of 4 tasks. Three marks will be awarded for each response. These marks will be given according to the following scale:

0: No evidence of knowledge of the topic in question.

1 mark: Limited knowledge of the topic in question.

2 marks: Moderate knowledge of the topic in question.

3 marks: Evidence of complete knowledge of the topic in question.

(2) Test tasks

Answer the following questions:

- (a) Outline the components of the following:
 - (1) listening
 - (2) reading
- (b) What are the similarities and differences between spoken and written discourse?
- (c) What are the advantages and disadvantages of guided composition?
- (d) What are the differences between formative and summative evaluation?

Appendix C

Pre/Post Thinking Test

(I) Portions of design statement

- (1) Purpose of the test: This test is designed to measure students' ability to think of ELT methodology. It is very specific to the goals and objectives of the fourth year methodology course.
- (2) Definition of construct: The construct to be measured is students' thinking of ELT methodology. This construct includes:
 - (a) evaluating the different approaches to teaching English as a foreign language,
 - (b) evaluating the different methods of teaching subsidiary and main language skills,
 - (c) evaluating the different approaches to error correction,

- (d) evaluating the different approaches to using the mother tongue in teaching English as a foreign language,
- (e) evaluating the different approaches to language testing, etc.

(3) Characteristics of test takers: Test takers are senior students enrolled in the department of English at the School of Education in Suez, 21 years of age and up, male and female.

(II) The test

- (1) Instructions to test takers: This is a test of your thinking of ELT methodology. It takes 3 hours. It consists of 4 tasks. Twelve marks will be awarded for each response. These marks are assigned to 4 aspects (3 marks for each) as follows:

Aspects	Rating Scale			
	Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good
a. Examinee considers different points of view.	0	1	2	3
b. Examinee uses credible sources and mentions them.	0	1	2	3
c. Examinee keeps his/her thinking relevant to the topic in question.	0	1	2	3
d. Examinee takes a position when the reasons are sufficient to do so.	0	1	2	3

(2) Test tasks

Answer the following questions:

- (a) Which of these approaches is the most effective in your context, a whole language approach, a skills-based approach, or a compromise between them? Why?
- (b) Do you think that grammar needs to be deliberately taught in the EFL classrooms? Why? Why not?
- (c) Do you think that overemphasis on language mistakes can distract learners' attention from meaning? Why? Why not?
- (d) What is your view about breaking down language proficiency into components for the purpose of testing?